

URBAN Consensus

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NEWARK'S PLIGHT IN PERSPECTIVE

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For three centuries Newark languished in the shadow of New York before achieving prominence in its own right. It was the civil disorders of 1967 that catapulted the city onto the nation's TV screens, and the subsequent revelations of corruption at City Hall kept it there. Newark's discovery by the mass media began a legion of well-styled experts who gleefully cited its crime rate, fireproof housing, creeping traffic, and troubled schools as symptoms of a fatal deterioration. Overnight Newark had become the most notorious specimen of the urban crisis.

The troubles of the late sixties were not the first in Newark's modern history, but they were the most significant. With the election of Mayor Kenneth A. Gibson (NCE '62) in June 1970, the city's heartbeat began to revive. Hope flowered that rational men and women could cooperate to thwart Newark's centuries with destiny. Today, two years later, only the most sanguine observer can believe the danger point to be past. True, Newark's descent into the abyss has probably been halted, but the long climb upward is just beginning. In weighing the city's present plight, it might be useful to review two of its earlier crises so as to gain some historical perspective.

TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY PROBLEMS

The end of the 19th century was a period of turbulence during

View from the Center

Harold D. Deutschman
Director of the Center



Whatever the destiny of America's cities in their struggle with the problems of crowding, traffic congestion, pollution, slums, crime and shifting population, it has been said that Newark will get there first. Yet, even with these severe problems it faces, Newark still retains great potential for renewal and revitalization.

While our principal concern is with the city as it is today, it seems appropriate to view Newark in its historical perspective. We discover, for example, that the quality of urban life in Newark weathered major crises in the past. In order to understand the present and forecast and plan for the future, we have asked Dr. Stanley B. Winters, a member of the NCE faculty and an authority on Newark, to give us an overview of Newark's past, concentrating on two earlier crises which demonstrate that Newark and other cities are capable of dealing successfully with major problems and retaining their place in the mainstream of American life. This issue of *Urban Consensus*, while a departure from our usual format, nevertheless deals with a topic important to our time.

Dr. Winters is a Professor of History and Associate Chairman of the Department of Humanities at NCE. Newark is one of his major research areas. He is currently preparing an article on the change in government in 1963-64 as part of an overall history of the city since the World War II. Dr. Winters is a member of the Advisory Board to the Center for Urban and Environmental Engineering.

which Newark underwent severe stresses and strains. Nationally there was a rising tide of European immigration, a fiscal panic on Wall Street, labor strife in steel and rails, and the war with Spain. New Jersey was then far from being the nation's most urbanized state that it is today. Over one-quarter of its people resided in the three industrial cities of Paterson, Jersey City, and Newark. Newark was

changing radically as Italians, Russians, Hungarians, Poles, Jews, and Greeks poured in from overseas. They entered the city's thriving leather, hat, brewing, carriage, and metal industries, to work alongside the Germans and Irish who had been there for decades. By 1910 fully 70 percent of the 347,000 Newarkers were either foreign-born or of foreign parentage. The assimilation of these immigrants—poor,

The businessmen wanted increased parking for shoppers and employees and reduced municipal costs; banks and insurance companies needed modern facilities with assurance of quality city services; parents of school-age children wanted new schools; forward-looking trade unionists and civic liberals demanded a greater voice for working people and minority groups; the League of Women Voters yearned for a scandal-free City Hall; the NAACP and Urban League advocated black representation in elective office, full equality of opportunity in municipal employment, and proper health care at City Hospital; the heirs to the old civic tradition desired a new burst of energy and idealism to restore Newark's fading luster, and the "out" politicians hoped that a change of government would get them "in."

CHARTER CHANGE

The outcome of this civic discontent was the formation early in 1953 of the Newark Citizens Committee on Municipal Government (NCCMG), chaired by Dean C. Willard Heckel of the Rutgers Law School and editorially backed by the *Newark Evening News*. NCCMG worked with diligence, decency, and common sense. It easily survived internal tensions of the sort that naturally arise when such diverse interests as labor and big business, amateur and professional politicians, and minority and civic groups cooperate in close coalition. It also brushed off attacks from foes entrenched at City Hall to win three solid-election victories within the span of one year. These occurred in May 1953, creating the Newark Charter Commission to study Newark's form of government; November 1953, accepting the Commission's recommendation for a changeover to a strong mayor-nine member council system; and May 1954, electing a mayor and councilmen somewhat sympathetic to the reforming ideas of the Commission and of NCCMG.

It would be simple for today, having the benefit of hindsight, to fault the reformers of the 1950's for relying perhaps excessively

upon a change in the form of government to resolve Newark's problems. The well-earned victory of their cause, however, did trigger new investments in the port area and the downtown business section; and it opened the doors to some innovative approaches in dealing with city affairs. But it did not appreciably sensitize City Hall to the needs of the residential neighborhoods or of the burgeoning black community, boxed into low-paying jobs and poor housing by racial discrimination and inferior opportunities.

The fact is that very few persons foresaw the speed with which Newark would slide into its subsequent crisis. The powerful forces behind the transformation of American cities were not fully understood. Many Newarkers who voted for a new administration in 1952 honestly believed that a brighter, more people-oriented day was dawning at City Hall, rather than an era of racial tensions and official corruption.

RESOURCES OF HOPE AND STRENGTH

We have seen how Newark during times of crisis found solutions to public needs as they were then perceived. Regarding the city's present complex problems, there are no instant solutions. The first step is to identify the causes and nature of the problems; the second is to know about existing resources which can be mobilized to deal with them.

Basic to the current situation is the fact that Newark's future rests with its black and Puerto Rican majority. Despite their enthusiasm and willingness to work hard and learn, these groups enter Newark's mainstream under worse circumstances, and with greater handicaps and deprivation, than those which confronted the immigrants of 1900. Once Newark was able to solve broad problems by itself or with the cooperation of its neighbors. Today it is surrounded by municipal and county structures and autonomous agencies that are fundamentally indifferent or hostile to the big city. Yet the regionalization of the burdens which Newark

bears is essential for any relief. This would be a partial repayment for the cooperation which Newark historically gave to its less developed and fiscally weaker neighbors.

True, at state and federal levels there is a deeper understanding of what is wrong in Newark than existed a decade ago. The investigations conducted by the U.S. Attorney's office are one sign of this. Another is the huge, although still insufficient, input of state and federal aid-funds. There is also the resource of Newark's youth, about half the population being age 19 or younger. There is interest and seriousness among many high school students, working youth, and thousands of college students who daily flood the campuses at NCE, Rutgers, and Essex Community. There is also a visible ethnic and neighborhood pride among city residents, white and black, whose energies are too often dissipated in divisive, negative endeavors. These groups must be enlisted in unifying campaigns for better municipal services, state and federal assistance, and cooperative self-help ventures.

Newark's institutions of higher education can bring to bear upon its problems much scientific knowledge and technique without altering their basically educative missions. Above all, the city's elected officials must join with civic and neighborhood leaders in all ideas and campaigns for civic betterment. Without the streamlining of the municipal bureaucracy and the growth of a spirit of dedication and service among city employees, no progressive changes in the cityscape are possible.

The job of harnessing these resources will be considerable, but the potential reward is enormous: The salvation of a community with a long and honorable past. Society should not discard a city that has weathered many previous crises to provide shelter and opportunity for countless thousands of people. With proper leadership, initiative, and commitment, Newark can continue to benefit its citizens, businesses, and institutions.